



# Late Winter Smallmouths

*It's never  
too early to  
hit your  
favorite river.*

story and photos  
by David Hart

**T**he first fish of the day came just minutes after Shawn Hash pushed his raft away from shore. He eased the boat up to an island in the middle of the New River, nodded toward a boulder, and

suggested I drop my lure in the slower water behind the rock. I barely cranked the handle on my reel when the spinnerbait on the end of my line hit something solid.

"Snagged," I thought.

As I lifted my rod tip, however, the snag turned into a fish and began stripping line as it raced for deeper water. Not only was I into the first bass of the day, I was into a good one. Hash grabbed the net while I wrestled the fish back to the raft. A few minutes later, I placed the smallmouth on a measuring board and then proudly hoisted the 20-inch bass for my boat partners to see. It was just one of a dozen big smallmouths we caught that day, including another that topped it.

That's not uncommon this time of year.

In fact, there's no better time to cross paths with a trophy-sized smallmouth in any of Virginia's famous smallmouth rivers than right now. Based on citation records kept by the Department, you'd think otherwise. More 20-inch or better smallmouths are caught in the warmer months than in March or April, but there's a simple explanation for that: There are far more people on Virginia's smallmouth rivers in May, June, and July. Hash, a New River guide and owner of Tangent Outfitters, isn't surprised. Only the most dedicated anglers seem willing to brave the elements. Those that do, however, are typically rewarded with their biggest bass of the year; sometimes even two, three, or four citation fish in a single day.

"You aren't going to have a 50-fish day in the late winter or early spring like you can in the summer, but the smallmouths are going to average much larger," says Chris McClellan, who was sharing the raft with me and Hash on that late March day last year. The angler from Rice continues, "It's as if every fish in the river is 15 inches or better. I have no idea where the small fish go, but we only catch quality bass in the winter and early spring."

Just days after our outing, McClellan and another angler boated seven bass over 18 inches, including a 21-½ incher, a trophy by anyone's standards.

(cont. pg. 15)



Top left, crankbaits are a top bait in the late winter or early spring. Make sure they dive deep enough to bump bottom, where the fish are. Above, during late winter, smallmouths often hug the sun-warmed shorelines and the good news is that most everything you catch will be a quality bass.





## Safety First

Don't assume you can shed your life jacket or even your coat just because the air may be in the 60s. It's always cooler on the water in March and April than it is on dry land, so take an extra sweatshirt. More important, always wear your life jacket. A sudden plunge into 50-degree water can result in exhaustion or unconsciousness in less than an hour, according to [boatsafe.com](http://boatsafe.com). Along with the shock of cold water, you'll be pulled down by the added weight of a thick layer of wet clothes that you wouldn't be wearing in the summer. That's why it is vital to always, always, always wear a life jacket—even on calm, flat water.

Be mentally and physically prepared to fall overboard, even if you think it will never happen to you. What will you do if your canoe tips or you fall out of your boat? How will you get back in? And what will you do next?

Always have a floating dry bag loaded with some essential gear that will help you survive if you take a spill. An extra change of warm clothes, a towel, and a reliable fire starter can mean the difference between life and death, or at least an uncomfortable ride back to your truck and a reasonably comfortable one.

Also, check the water level before you leave home. High, fast water can be dangerous, and it can make for tough fishing. The U.S. Geological Survey has a website that reports real-time water flow data, including river levels, at: <http://waterdata.usgs.gov/va/nwis/rt>. It's a valuable tool that can help you decide if the river is safe for boating before you even leave home.

## Time To Go, Relatively Speaking

Smallmouths gladly eat a lure just about all year long in Virginia. Hash has caught fish in 38-degree water, but they can be fickle creatures in the early spring, pouncing on lures one day and shunning them the next. A great day on the river can be followed by a tough one. While many hard-core smallmouth anglers pay close attention to water temperature, Hash is less interested in the specific temperature than a revealing trend.

"People ask me all the time what the river's water temperature is and I tell them, but that's not what's important this time of year," he insists.

Instead, Hash looks for a warming trend. It doesn't matter if the water is 40 degrees today, for example. He wants to see several days of warming weather that will ultimately increase water temperature a few degrees. If the water jumps from 44 to 47 or 48 to 50, it's time to go fishing. A difference of just a few degrees is enough to get the fish active and feeding.

That's not to say you need to monitor the water temperature on a daily basis. A glance at the weather forecast can tell you all you need to know. If the air has been in the low 40s all week and a three-, four-, or five-day warming trend of five to ten degrees is on tap, plan a day to float one of Virginia's smallmouth rivers. But plan it toward the end of that warming spell.

But it's not just a warming trend that can dictate success or failure. Water color is also important. Many dedicated winter smallmouth anglers favor chalky-green water, but plenty of big bass are caught in dirty brown water, which actually warms faster than clearer water. Just as Hash looks for a warming trend in water temperatures, he also likes a positive trend in color—water that is gradually changing from muddy to stained as the days progress. So does McClellan, who says that anywhere from one to three feet of visibility is ideal.

"Clear water can be tough because the fish can be real spooky, but you can certainly catch them in clear water. Dirtier water is better because they can't see your boat and have less time to look at your lure and decide not to eat it," he adds.

## Lures, Simply Speaking

Fortunately, choosing the right lure for an early spring outing isn't complicated. Both anglers are big fans of crankbaits, spinnerbaits, suspending jerkbaits, and jigs. That's just about all they use in March and April.

"I'm using what most anglers consider largemouth baits. Most of the fish I catch this time of year are pretty big, so I think larger lures just help catch bigger bass," says McClellan.

He'll rig three or four rods with different baits, switching as the mood strikes him or as

he encounters water that just fits a specific bait. For example, a jig is ideal for deeper, slower holes, while a crankbait is the perfect lure to pull parallel to mid-river ledges. A spinnerbait can be fished just about anywhere, including right next to the shoreline or over shallower flats and behind ledges and boulders. Of course, all of those lures can be fished just about anywhere and there are no steadfast rules, especially at this time of year. The key is to try different baits until the fish tell you which one they prefer. One day, it might be a white half-ounce spinnerbait or a crawfish-pattern crankbait, while the next day, or even the next hour, the fish might want a quarter-ounce black jig and trailer crawled across the bottom or a chartreuse crankbait pulled through pockets behind boulders. Change lure style, color, size, and retrieve until you find the right combination. And don't hesitate to cast to unlikely spots. Winter smallmouths tend to favor slower water, but they will move as the water warms.

"We catch them on flats in a foot or two of water in the late winter, especially in the middle of the day when the water has warmed up a little more," says Hash. "You just never know."

When you do catch a bass, take note of the location, the depth, and anything else that might point to a pattern. Other bass may be lurking in similar areas farther downriver, allowing you to target locations. Remember, you'll probably only catch a few fish all day, so don't expect to get a bite every few minutes. That's just part of a late-winter smallmouth outing. Patience is one of the most important factors this time of year.

## Just Go

Even more important? Mustering up the will—and a partner—to spend a day on the water. While Hash and McClellan have the luxury of choosing the days that offer the best overall conditions, they both admit that big bass will bite at just about any time. You just never know. In other words, if you simply can't stay indoors for another day, grab a friend, load up your gear, and head to the nearest smallmouth river. You just might catch the biggest bass—or two or three—of your life. ❧

*David Hart is a full-time freelance writer and photographer from Rice. He is a regular contributor to numerous national hunting and fishing magazines.*



You'll only need 4 or 5 lures this time of year, but make sure you bring different colors and sizes. Left, Chris McClellan caught this 20-inch smallmouth in late March, one of nearly a dozen fish over 15 inches that day.